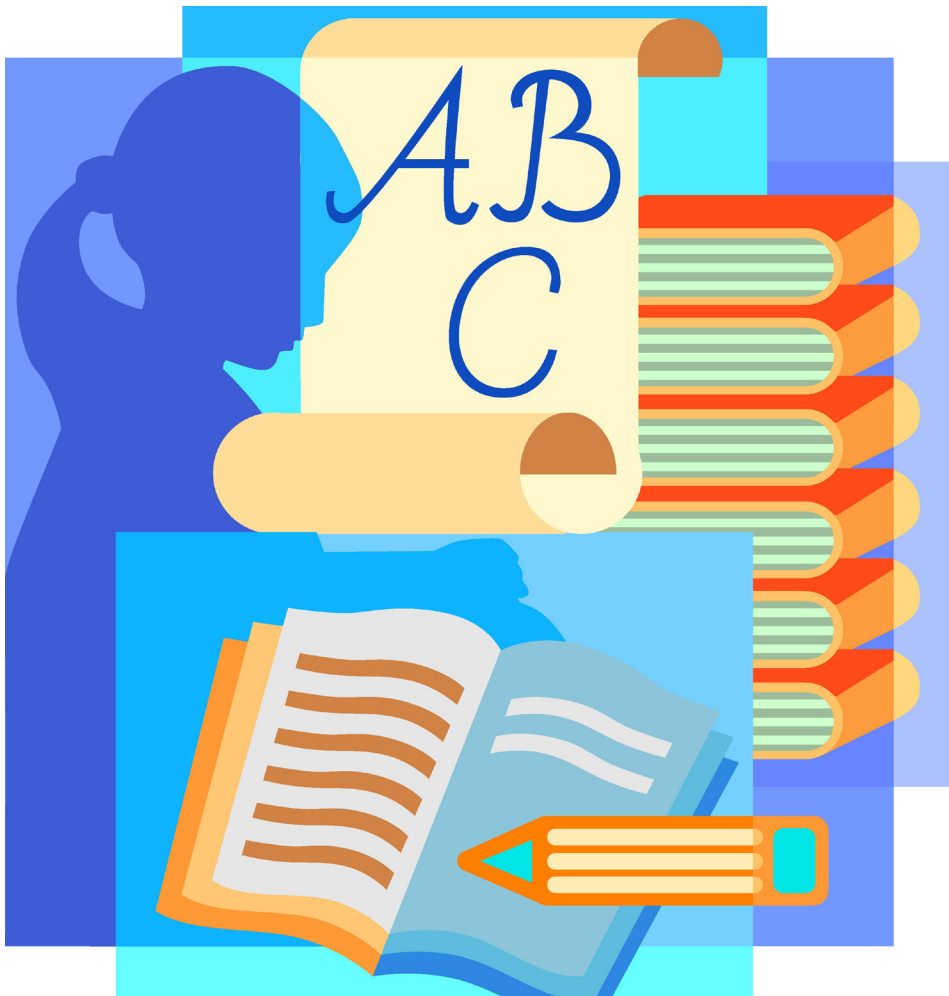

School Climate and Connection

A Learning Supports Data Tool

Iowa Department of Education • Revised February 2007



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State of Iowa
Department of Education
Grimes State Office Building
Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0146

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Contacts

For more information about:

School Climate and Connection Report, please contact:

Janell Brandhorst, Consultant, Department of Education

515-281-5288

Janell.Brandhorst@iowa.gov

The Iowa Youth Survey, please contact:

Geneva Adkins, Justice Systems Analyst, Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning

515-242-5199

Geneva.Adkins@iowa.gov

OR

Linda McGinnis, Prevention Consultant, Department of Public Health

515-281-5444

LMcGinni@idph.state.ia.us

Learning Supports, please contact:

Jane Todey, Consultant, Department of Education

515-281-8514

Jane.Todey@iowa.gov

Related Web-Sites:

Iowa Department of Education / www.iowa.gov/educate

Iowa Youth Survey / www.iowayouthsurvey.org

Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development / www.icyd.org

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What?

What is the problem with school climate and connection?

School climate generally refers to the adult and student experiences, perceptions, and feelings that individuals have about their school. An effective school climate is a safe and supportive environment that nurtures social and emotional competencies along with academic instruction.

A positive school climate attends to:

- ❖ Emotional and physical safety
- ❖ High expectations and supports for achievement
- ❖ Quality instruction
- ❖ Sense of community
- ❖ Healthy peer norms
- ❖ Positive school-family partnerships

A safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climate tends to foster greater attachment to school and provide a foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning. One of the basic components of school climate is building and sustaining relationships to ensure that people feel “connected” to one another in the school.

School connection is the belief by students that adults and peers care about their learning and care about them as individuals. Students are more likely to feel they belong when teachers create a caring, well-structured learning environment as described above. When such conditions exist, teachers report that students pay attention, stay focused, do more than is required, and ultimately have higher grades and test scores.

The Case for Talking about School Climate and Connection

Research has shown that a relationship exists between school climate and a student’s self-concept. Also, a series of studies have demonstrated ties between school climate and student attendance as well as the rate of student suspensions and expulsions. A growing body of research suggests that school climate influences school connection. School connection, in turn, is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and academic outcomes, tobacco and drug use, early sex, violence, and suicidal thoughts and attempts.

In order to succeed in school, students need to feel they “belong”. The following six qualities seem to influence students’ positive attachment to school:

- ❖ Having a sense of belonging and being part of their school
- ❖ Perceiving that teachers are supportive and caring
- ❖ Having good friends within school
- ❖ Being engaged in their own current and future academic progress
- ❖ Believing that discipline is fair and effective
- ❖ Participating in extracurricular activities

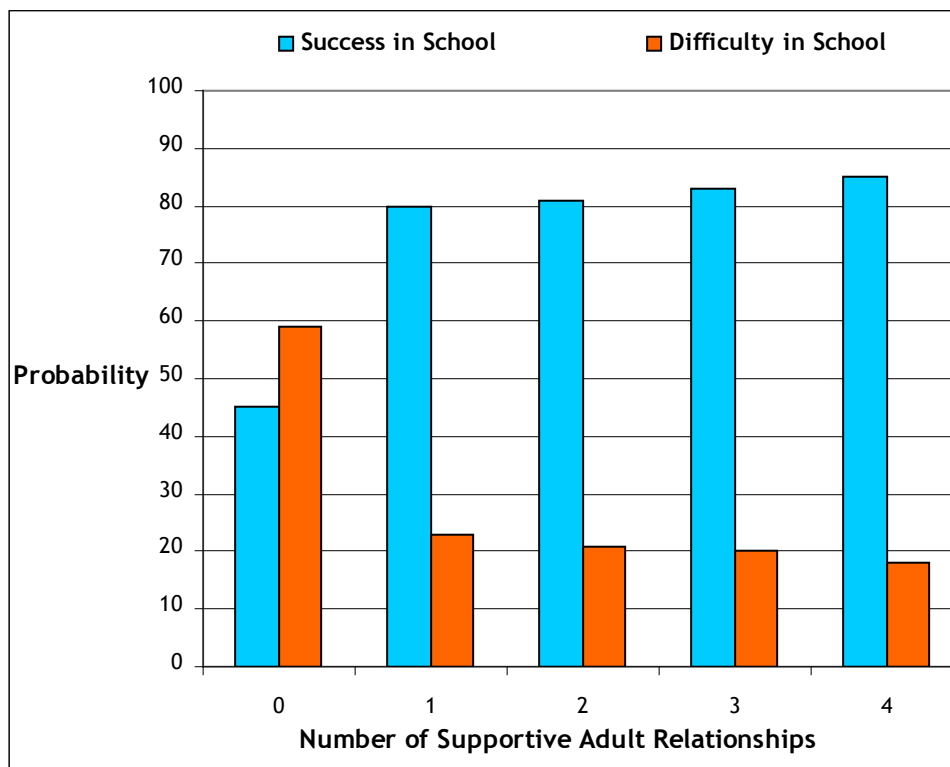
These factors, measured in different ways, are highly predictive of success in school. Because each of these six factors brings with it a sense of connection - to oneself and one’s friends and community - it is clear that school connection makes a difference in the lives of Iowa’s youth.

School Connection and Student Achievement

School leaders concerned with increasing student achievement must also be concerned about increasing the number of students feeling connected to school because this connection has been shown to impact accountability measures (e.g. attendance, dropout, and graduation rates; suspensions and expulsions). In Iowa, much attention has been focused on increasing the rigor and relevance of curriculum to meet the mandates set forth in No Child Left Behind. Much less attention has been given to developing positive school climates and building adult-to-student and student-to-student relationships. While rigor and relevance are key to improving achievement, research has clearly demonstrated the impact that relationships have on success in school.

The chart below illustrates the impact that positive adult relationships can have on youth and their academic success. Notice that when a student has no positive adult relationships his/her probability for difficulty in school exceeds the probability that he/she will be successful. The presence of only one positive adult relationship reverses the probabilities and drastically increases the student's probability of being successful in school. As the number of positive adult relationships increases, the effect on success in school continues to be positive.

Supportive Adult Relationships and Probability for School Success



So What?

What does your data say about school climate and connection?

Where to Find Your Data - The Iowa Youth Survey

The Iowa Youth Survey (IYS) is a voluntary survey given to 6th, 8th, and 11th graders on a three-year cycle, most recently in the fall of 2005. Most school districts (359) and students (98,246) in the state participated in the survey in 2005. The survey relies on students to read and honestly answer each question, but the data from 1999, 2002, and 2005 is quite consistent. Also, to safeguard the validity of the survey results, each survey proceeds through a series of validity checks and is not included in the analysis if it fails these checks. So, the IYS is considered to be a comprehensive, reliable, and valid data source in the state of Iowa.

Constructs Represented in The IYS

The 2005 IYS is comprised of 190 questions and contains information about students' environment, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of others. Many of the questions are grouped together to form constructs that summarize important concepts in the data. Below is a list of the 34 constructs covered in the 2005 survey. Constructs that are ***bold and italic*** contain questions related to school climate and connection.

Positive family relationships	Suicide risk
Family involvement and support	Current alcohol use
Parental/guardian boundaries	Current tobacco use
Positive parental/guardian norms	Current illegal drug use
<i>School expectations/boundaries</i>	Substance use risk awareness
<i>Safe school environment</i>	Violent/aggressive behavior
<i>School perceived to be safe*</i>	Gambling
<i>School staff/student support</i>	Helping others*
Positive student norms	Empathy
Social pressure to use substances	Self-confidence
Positive community adult norms	Self-esteem*
Positive community peer norms	Acceptance of diversity
Youth access to substances limited	Positive values
Safe neighborhood	Peer pressure resistance*
Supportive neighborhood	Commitment to school/learning
Alcohol/drug free places available*	Positive work ethic*
Bullying	Adults stop bullying*

*Construct contains only one item.

School Climate and Connection Questions on the IYS

There are 15 questions on the IYS that are related to school climate and connection. They can be broken down into four different categories based on the constructs that they contribute to.

Questions Related to School Expectations and Boundaries

- ❖ In my school, there are clear rules about what students can and cannot do.
- ❖ In my school, the school principal and teachers consistently enforce school rules.
- ❖ In my school, if I skipped school at least one of my parents/guardians would be notified.
- ❖ In my school, students caught drinking, smoking, or using an illegal drug are not allowed to participate in any extracurricular activity for some time period.
- ❖ My school lets a parent/guardian know if I've done something wrong.
- ❖ About how often in the last three weeks have any of your classroom teachers had to stop teaching in order to deal with a major student disruption or behavior problem?

Questions Related to Safe School Environment

- ❖ In the past 12 months, how often have you had your things (clothing, books, bike, car) stolen or deliberately damaged on school property?
- ❖ In the past 12 months, how often have you been threatened or injured by someone with a weapon (like a gun, knife or club) on school property?

Questions Related to School Perceived to Be Safe

- ❖ I feel safe at school.

Questions Related to School Staff/Student Support

- ❖ My teachers care about me.
- ❖ My teachers are available to talk to students one-on-one.
- ❖ My teachers notice when I am doing a good job and let me know about it.
- ❖ Students in my school treat each other with respect.
- ❖ My school lets a parent/guardian know if I'm doing a good job.
- ❖ There is at least one adult at school that I could go to for help with a problem.

Areas of Concern in State-Level Data

When considering the state-level IYS climate and connection data, some important areas of concern emerge. The table below displays the questions where at least 25% of participants in the state gave undesirable responses. After you have analyzed your local data, use the final column in the table to write your own local results related to these questions. Are these areas of concern to you at the local level also?

Questions Where 25% or More of 2005 Statewide Participants Gave an Undesirable Response

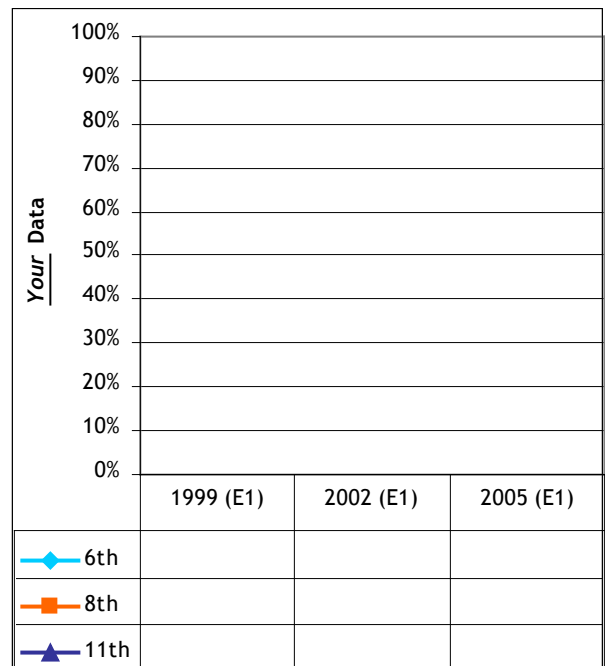
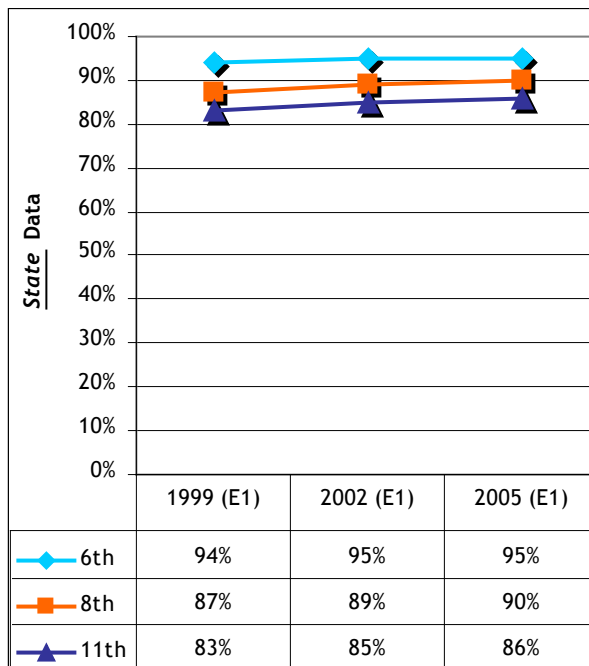
Question	Grade	2005 State Level Result	2005 Local Level Result
Percentage of students who disagree or strongly disagree that the school principal and teachers consistently enforce school rules (E2) - School Expectations and Boundaries	11th	26%	
Percentage of students who report that in the last three weeks their classroom teacher(s) had to stop teaching at least once to deal with disruptions or problem behaviors (B14) - School Expectations and Boundaries	6th 8th 11th	70% 75% 67%	
Percentage of students who disagree or strongly disagree that their teachers notice when they are doing a good job and let them know about it (E17) - School Staff/Student Support	11th	29%	
Percentage of students who disagree or strongly disagree that the students in their school treat each other with respect (E18) - School Staff/Student Support	6th 8th 11th	28% 48% 52%	
Percentage of students who disagree or strongly disagree that their school lets a parent/guardian know if they're doing a good job (E23) - School Staff/Student Support	8th 11th	27% 40%	

State and Local Trend Data

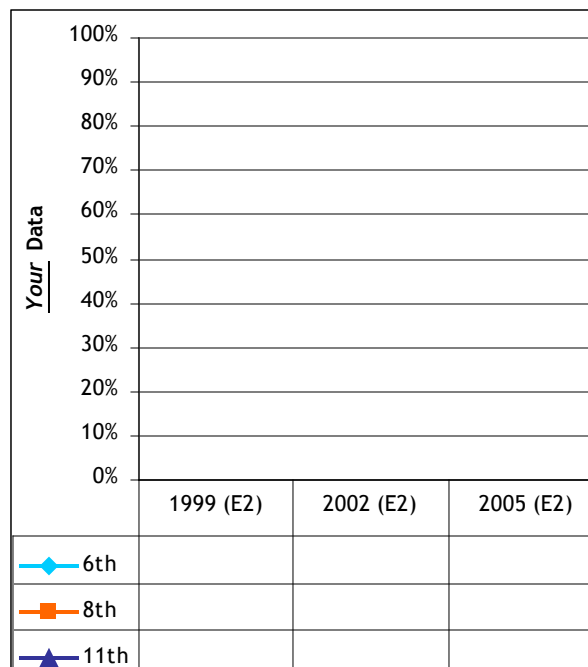
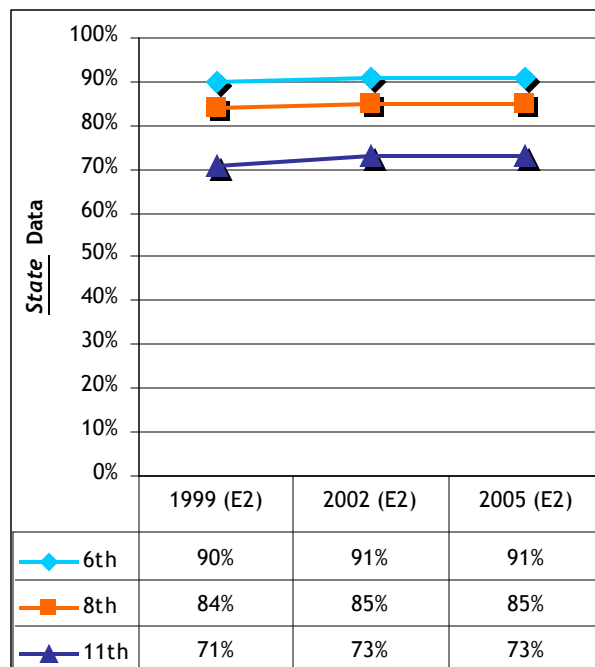
The following charts display state level trend data for all of the questions on the IYS related to school climate and connection. Next to the state results, use the blank charts to insert your local data into. If local results for any particular question at any grade level are different (more than 5 percentage points higher or lower) than the state average, this may be an area that warrants further investigation.

Results Related to School Expectations and Boundaries

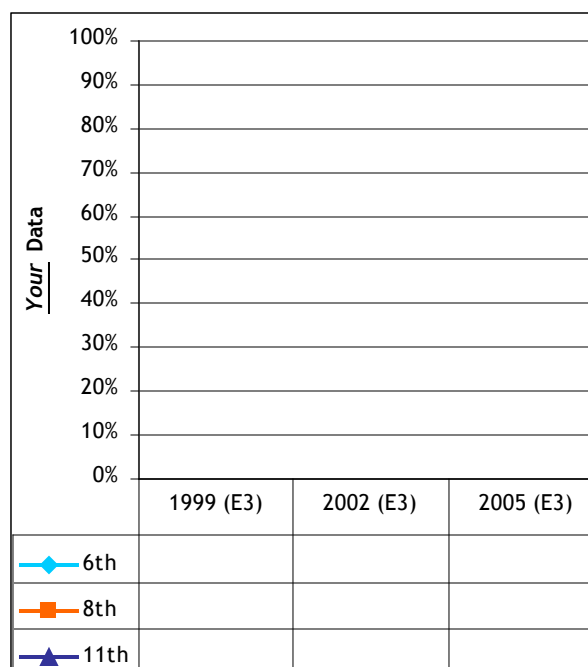
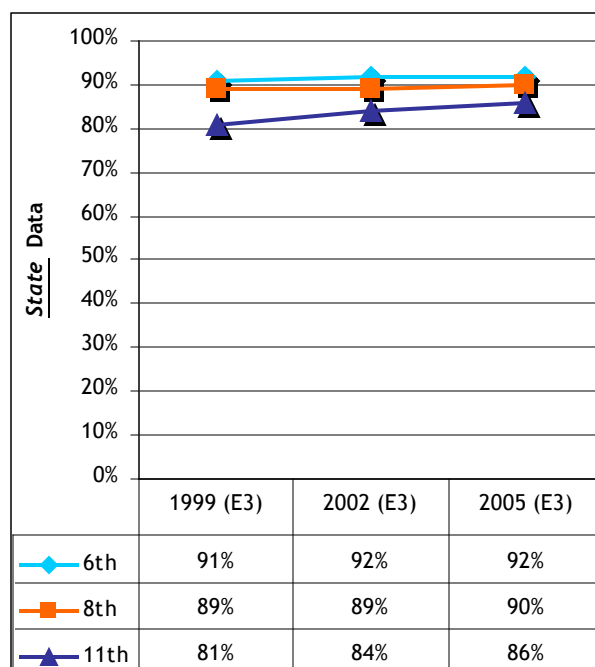
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that there are clear rules about what students can and cannot do



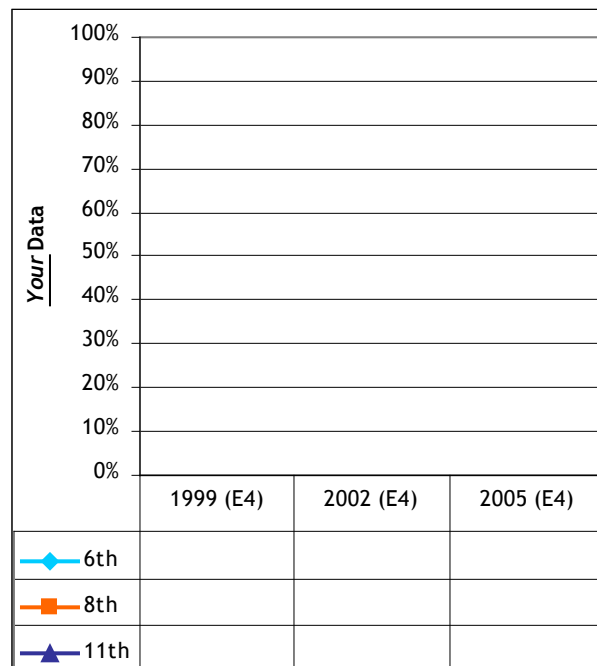
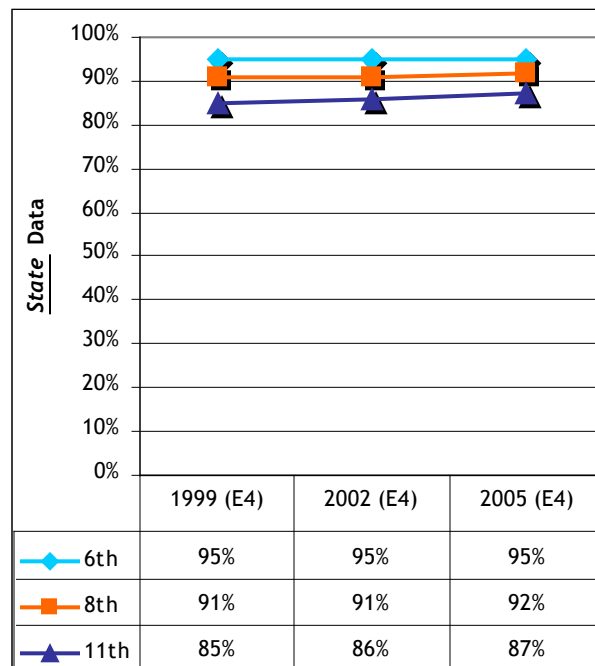
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that the school principal and teachers consistently enforce school rules



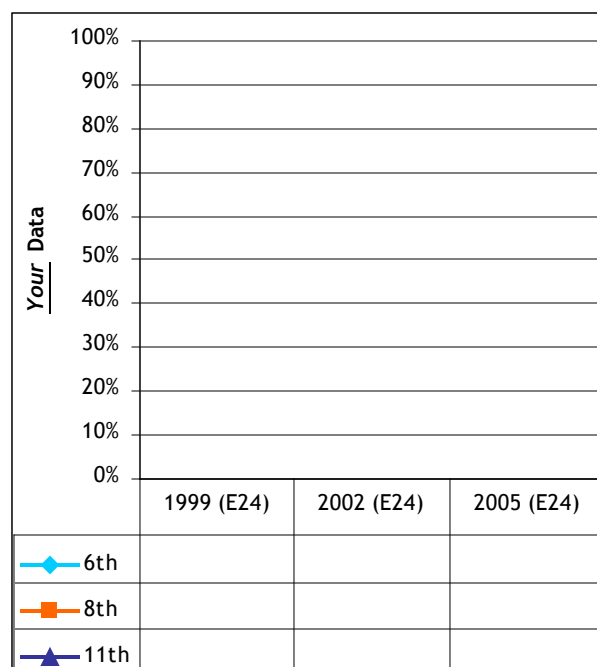
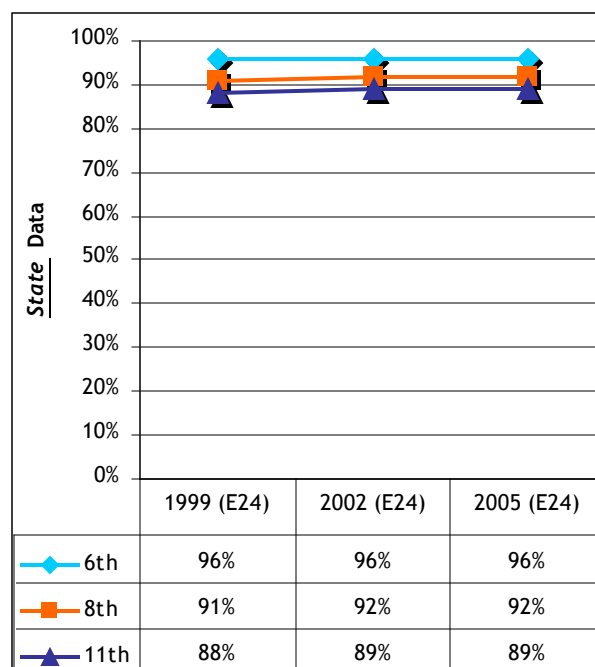
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that if they skipped school, at least one of their parents/guardians would be notified



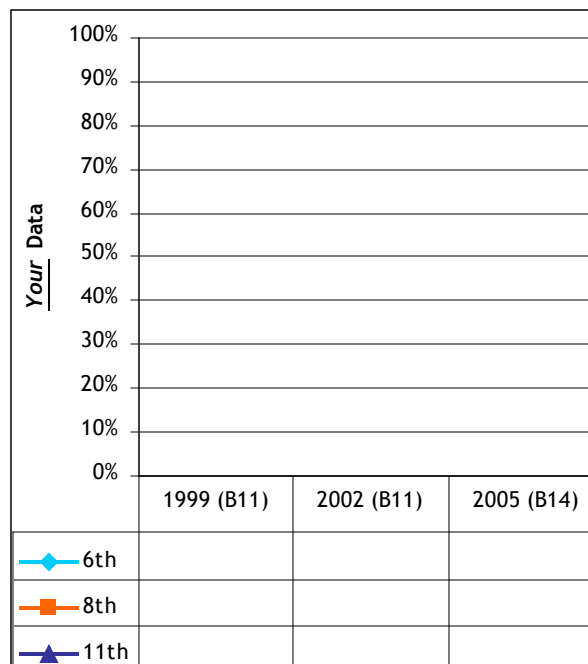
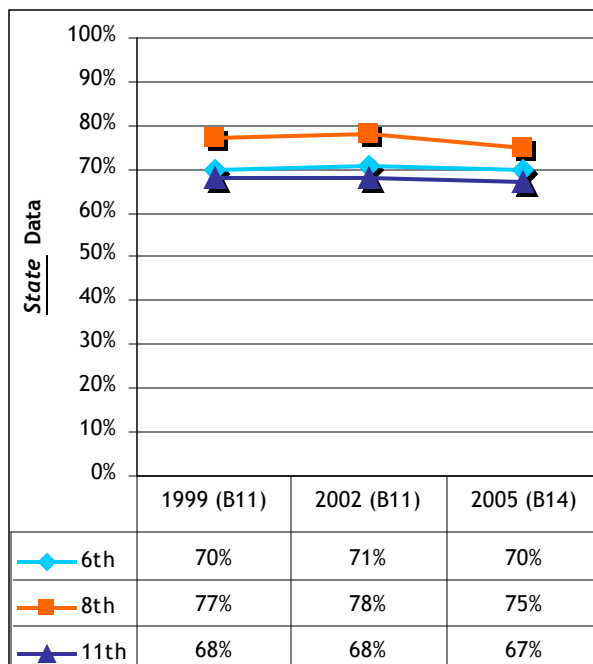
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that students caught drinking, smoking, or using illegal drugs are not allowed to participate in extra-curricular activities



Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that their school lets a parent/guardian know if they've done something wrong

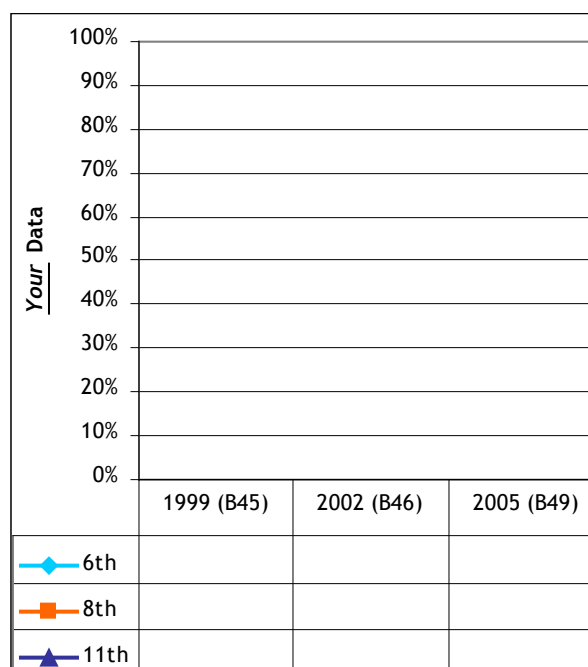
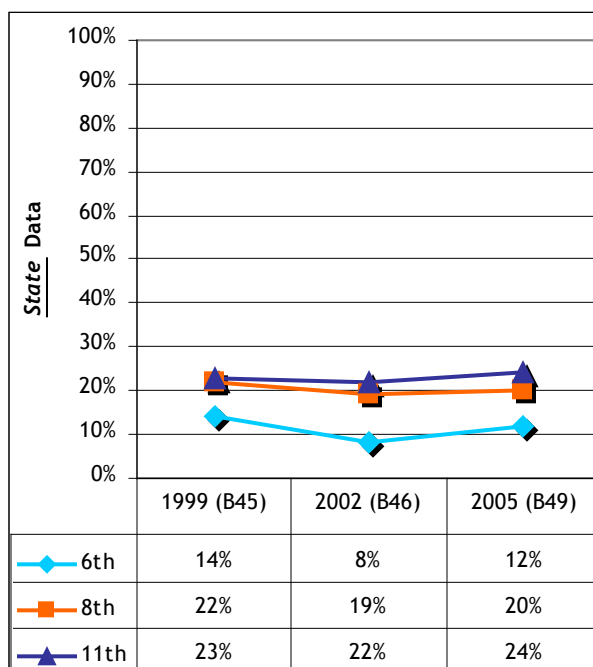


Percentage of students who report that in the last three weeks their classroom teacher(s) had to stop teaching to deal with disruptions or problem behaviors

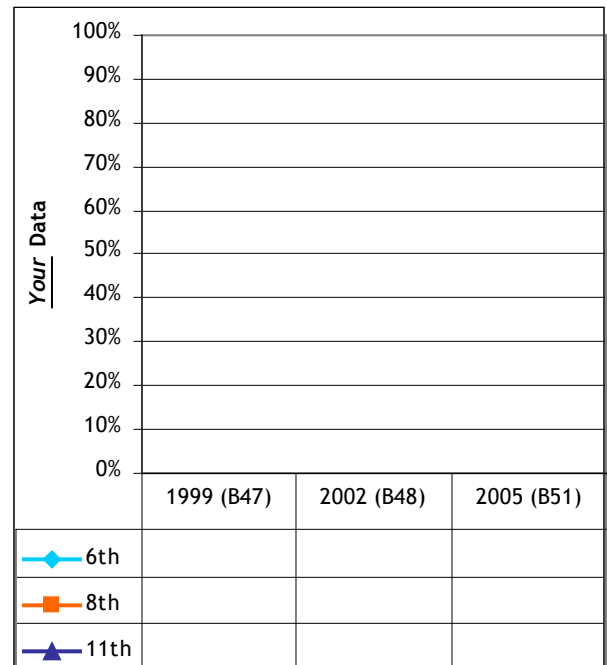
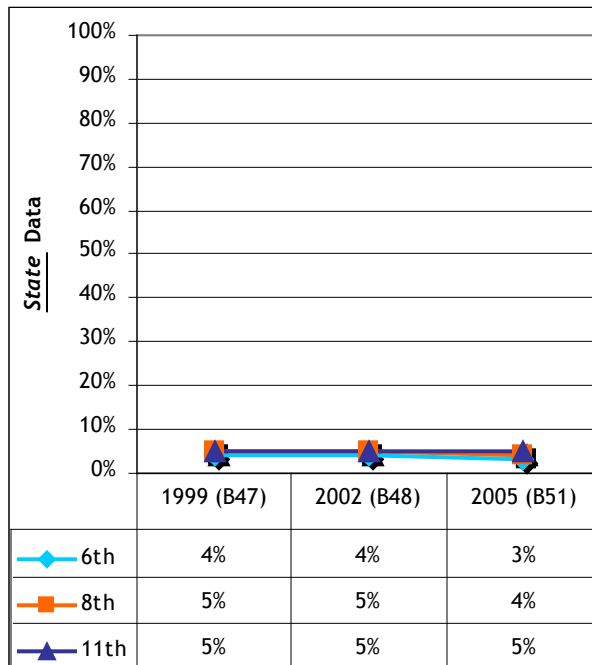


Results Related to Safe School Environment and School Perceived to be Safe

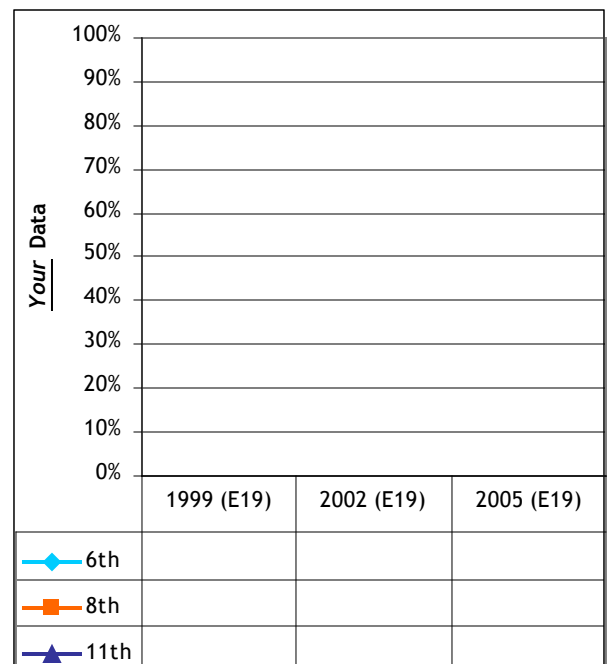
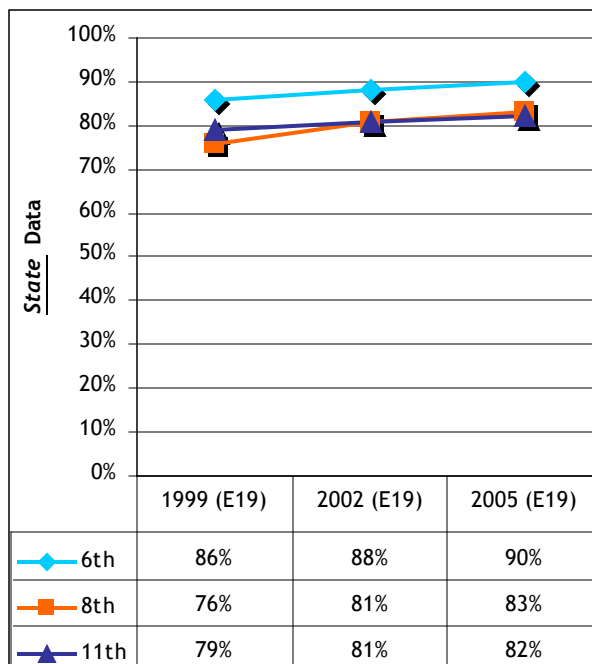
Percentage of students who have had their things stolen or deliberately damaged on school property at least once in the past 12 months



Percentage of students who have been threatened or injured by someone with a weapon on school property at least once in the past 12 months

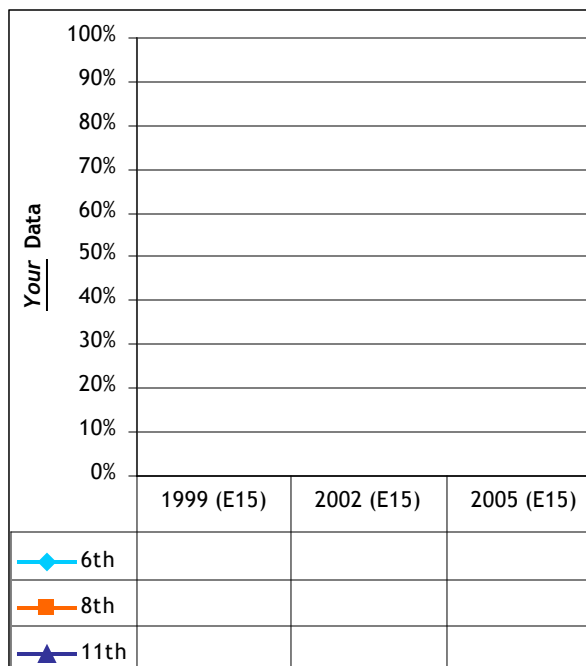
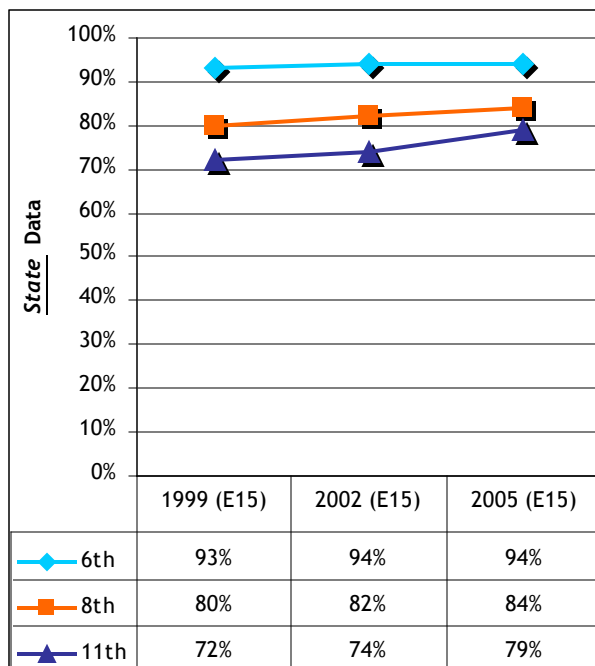


Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that they feel safe at school

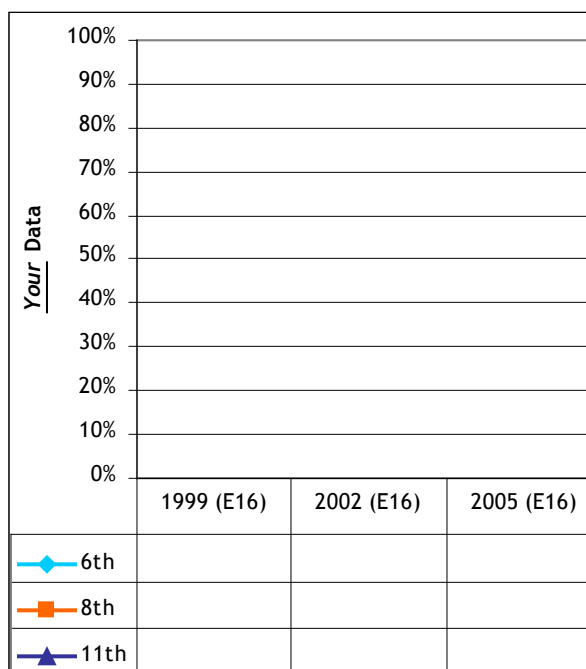
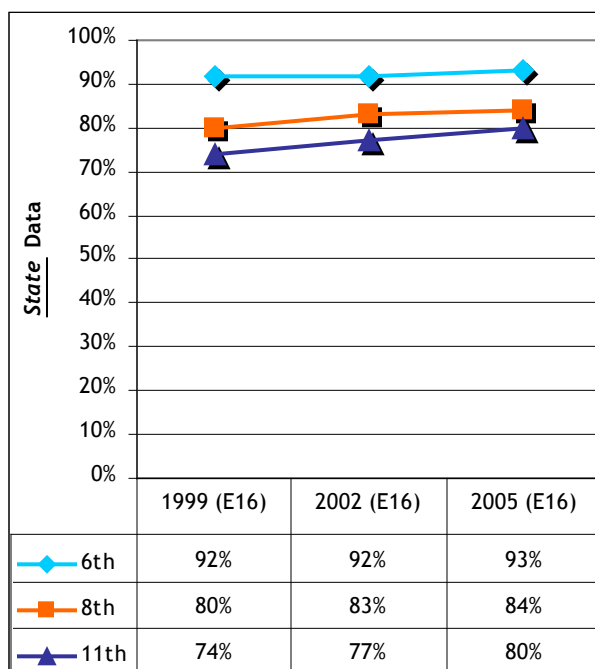


Results Related to School Staff/Student Support

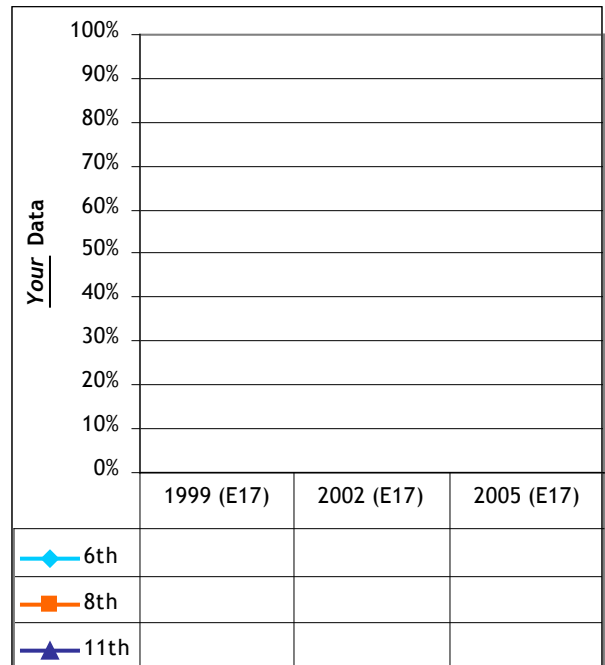
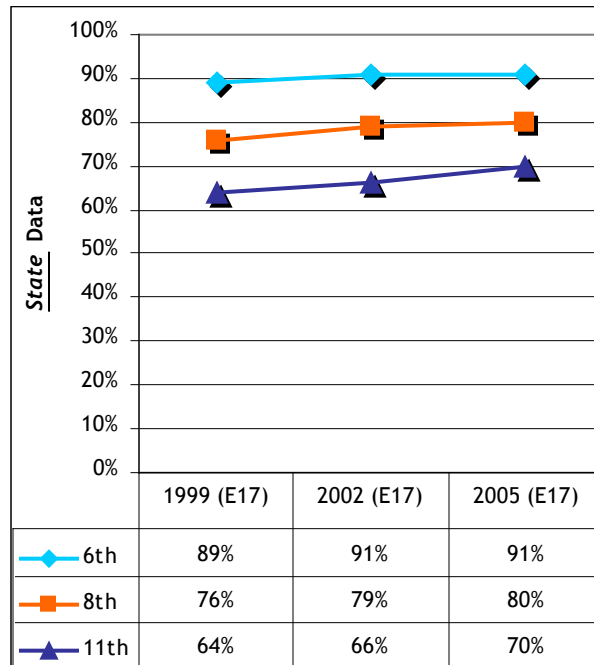
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that their teachers care about them



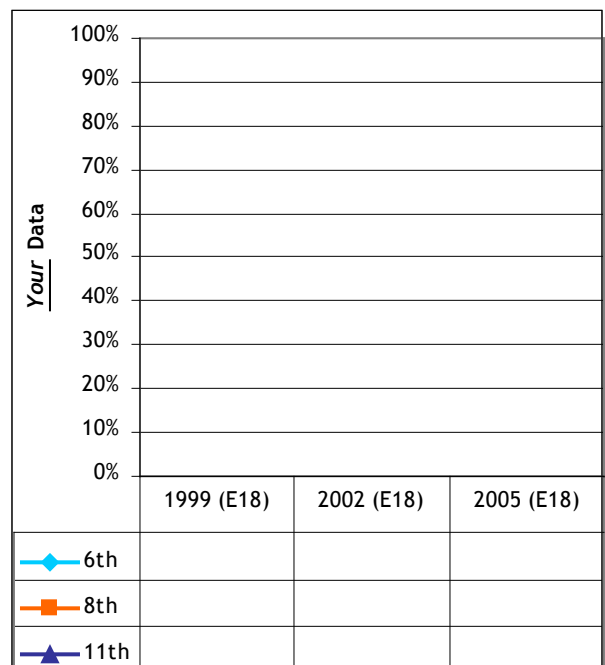
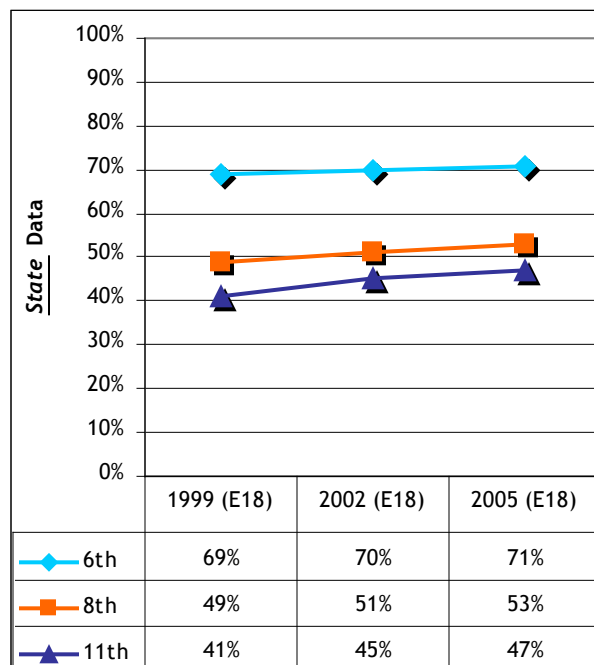
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that their teachers are available to talk with students one-on-one



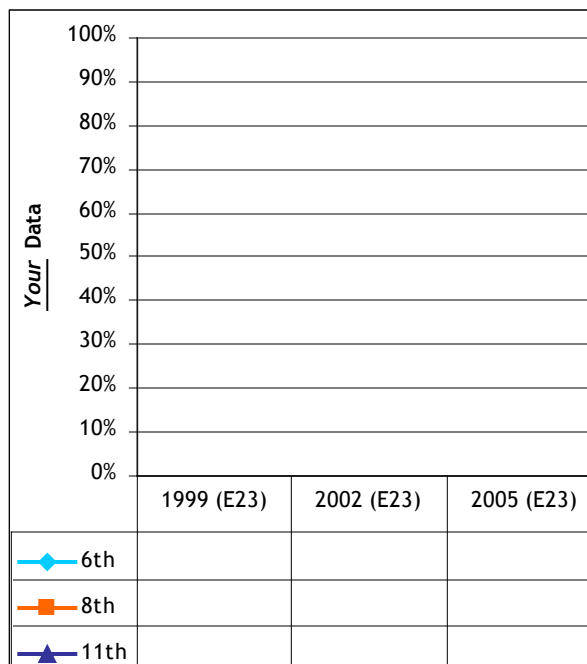
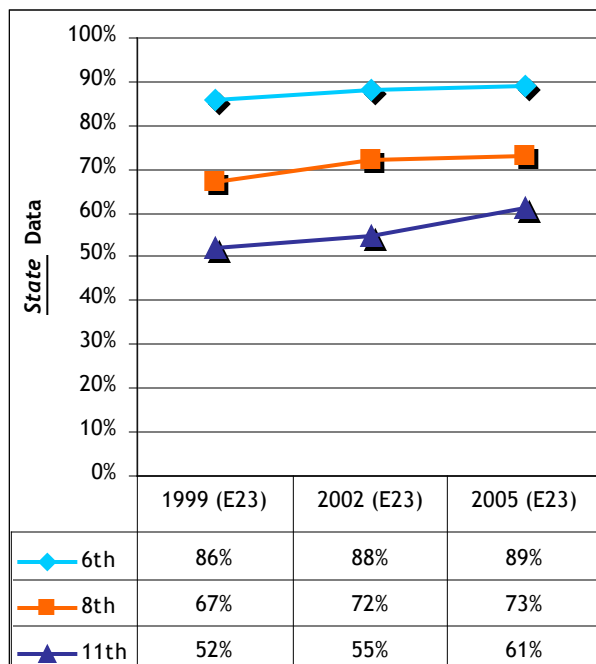
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that their teachers notice when they are doing a good job and let them know about it



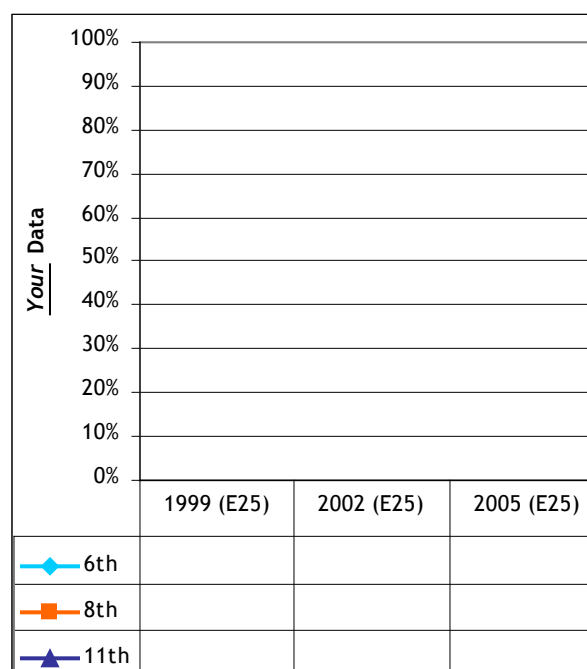
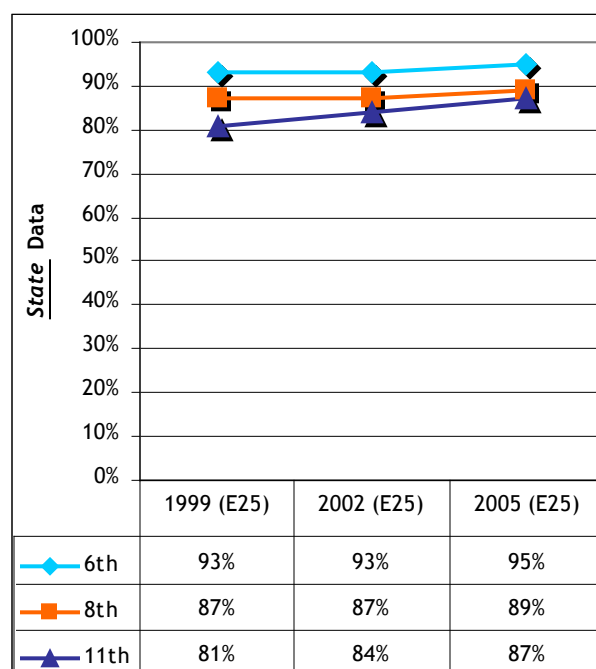
Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that the students in their school treat each other with respect



Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that their school lets a parent/guardian know if they're doing a good job



Percentage of students who agree or strongly agree that there is at least one adult at school that they could go to for help with a problem



Guide for Discussion about IYS Trend Data

The following questions are designed to facilitate a broad discussion with stakeholders about local climate and connection trend data.

1. What additional data sources may be useful in helping you understand your local IYS school climate and connection data?
2. What in particular concerns you about your trend data? How will the trendline continue in the future if you maintain current programming? Is this trend acceptable? If not, how would you prefer it to look in the future?
3. What have you already done to address school climate and connection issues in your area?
4. What does the research say will improve school climate and connection issues?

5. Based on your data, what do you propose to do in the future to address climate and connection issues in your area? (Include at least one low-cost/no-cost idea). See the following “Now What?” section for ideas.
6. Who will your partners be? Who else is concerned about these issues? What resources do you need? How could you spend existing resources more effectively?
7. How will you know that the youth in your area are better off?
8. Is there additional information you will need to collect to monitor your progress and verify that your plan is effective?

Now What?

What can school board members do to help improve school climate and connection?

Consider the Following Action Steps...

- ❖ Ask to see the data on climate and connection for students in your district.
- ❖ Talk with administrators, teachers, and students in your district about “the story” behind that data - why do your students feel the way they do about their school?
- ❖ Determine what gaps in current programming exist to promote a healthy climate and student connection.
- ❖ Ask what your district is currently doing to improve school climate and connection. Does your current programming have an evidence-base? Is it likely to make a change in student feelings?
- ❖ Support implementation of evidence-based efforts that address identified gaps.
- ❖ Ask for regular data reports on how student climate and connection is changing. Request that this report become a part of your district’s ongoing school improvement efforts.
- ❖ Remember, the things that get reported on are the things that get changed. Research has clearly shown that students who feel comfortable in their environment and connected to school do better academically and also are less likely to be involved in risky behaviors.

Your AEA can help you better understand your district data to identify links between climate, connection, and achievement for students in your district. AEA staff can also help your district identify the supports needed to ensure that all students are connected to, and successful in, school. Anything you can do to promote ongoing conversations at all levels of your district about school climate and student connection will improve the likelihood that students in your district will succeed!

Now What?

What can students do to help improve school climate and connection?

Students play a key role in setting the climate of a school. When students are full partners in the development of policies and practices that directly affect them, they are afforded a real-life opportunity to practice their leadership skills.

If you are a student who feels comfortable at school and well connected to other students and adults in the school...

- ❖ Reach out to new students. Welcome them and invite them to participate in school activities to help them become comfortable with their new surroundings.
- ❖ Ask school leadership about starting a “peer ambassador” program, a buddy program, or hosting a monthly “mixer” for new students.
- ❖ Invite a new student or someone who is less connected than you to join your group of friends.

If you are a new student or someone who is not well connected to the school...

- ❖ Seek out a relationship with at least one adult at school.
- ❖ Ask about getting involved in activities that are of interest to you.
- ❖ Find another student with common interests and ask about the extra-curricular activities and courses that they have taken.

Every student can...

- ❖ Be a positive role model for others.
- ❖ Hold high expectations for their own behavior and that of others.
- ❖ Demonstrate good sportsmanship.
- ❖ Ask for help from an adult when needed.

Now What?

What can parents do to help improve school climate and connection?

Consider the following action steps for your own family...

- ❖ Foster the love of learning in your home and be a positive role model as a life-long learner.
- ❖ Talk with your child regularly about school; what he/she enjoys most, friends, teachers, etc. Use such times to share your values about education and learning.
- ❖ Hold high expectations that your child will do well at school and talk with him/her about this often.
- ❖ Develop routines that will provide consistent and regular support for learning.

Consider the following action steps for the school your child attends...

- ❖ Get to know the teachers and other adults at school that are important to your child.
- ❖ Advocate for the positive development of your child and talk to your child's teachers about ways to support his/her development and education.
- ❖ Respond to communications from the school and don't hesitate to contact a teacher if you have a question or concern.
- ❖ Know your school's policies, practices, and expectations and talk about them with your child. Such information should be outlined in a student or parent handbook.
- ❖ Find out about and support your child's involvement in extracurricular activities.
- ❖ Ask for assistance from your child's classroom teacher or guidance counselor if you are concerned that he/she is not fitting in or doesn't like to go to school.

Consider the following action steps for supporting others...

- ❖ Volunteer, mentor, or coach academic or co-curricular activities.
- ❖ Network with other parents and/or link families with parent representatives from school committees and boards.
- ❖ Reach out to other youth who appear to be isolated or uninvolved in school activities.
- ❖ Convene organizations and groups for school improvement. Support active PTA/PTO, parent advisory councils, and specific committees with parent participation such as curriculum and safety groups.

Now What?

What can community members do to help improve school climate and connection?

There are many ways that community members can support students. Learn about the various activities that your district offers students and become involved in or support those that are of most interest to you.

As a business leader consider...

- ❖ Developing school-business relationships by supporting job fairs, career days, creating job shadowing opportunities for students, and allowing students to visit your business to learn more about the skills needed for successful employment.
- ❖ Participating in or providing opportunities for community service or supporting service learning activities.
- ❖ Adopting family-friendly practices that support student learning such as parental time-off for school events, student conferences, etc.

As a local service provider consider...

- ❖ Supporting school/community relationships by providing information on the services available for students and their families.
- ❖ Sharing your expertise on appropriate committees and groups.

Regardless of your position in the community, consider...

- ❖ Becoming a mentor or a tutor.
- ❖ Asking how you can help make sure that all students have the supplies they need for daily assignments.
- ❖ Supporting students who may not have the clothing, instruments, rentals, etc. that are needed to participate in extra-curricular activities on an equal footing with other students.
- ❖ Sharing information on summer educational programs in the community as well as internship work opportunities.
- ❖ Volunteering, serving on committees, and attending plays, sporting events, concerts, etc.

Now What?

What can school administrators do to help improve school climate and connection?

There are several ways that administrators can support a positive school climate and school connections. Of special importance is to:

- ❖ Use a school social climate assessment tool to measure teacher, student and community member perceptions.
- ❖ Assure that parents are well informed.
- ❖ Foster teacher collaboration to ensure the provision of social emotional learning opportunities.

Other action steps to consider...

- ❖ Be committed to authoritative rather than authoritarian leadership. Negotiate rules with students and expect that all adults in school serve on a committee.
- ❖ Engage students, teachers, and administrators in establishing and reviewing school rules annually. Be clear about consequences for infractions and be certain that they are applied fairly.
- ❖ Provide a clear academic mission that is defined by administrators, students, teachers, and parents. Ensure that the mission is written out and posted in every classroom.
- ❖ Promote high academic standards and expectations. Set goals for each teacher and review semi-annually. Use awards to reinforce achievements as well as improvements and innovations.
- ❖ Involve students in maintaining the physical environment and use all-school projects like cleanup, repair, and planting. Use the lunchroom for activities to gain student input, support, information, and to share decisions.
- ❖ Create small learning environments. Establish schools-within-a-school and create physical spaces throughout the school where small groups can meet.
- ❖ Assure that every student in the school has an adult assigned to know him or her and to “watch out” for that student.
- ❖ Encourage that prior to the start of the school year every new student is assigned to an adult who: a) calls him/her before schools begins, b) greets the student on the first day of school, c) introduces the student to the first period class, and d) periodically checks in with the student.

